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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is deeply concerned over the recent passage of a harshly repressive new law on religion in Turkmenistan. This new law further codifies the Turkmen government's already highly repressive policies on religion that effectively ban most religious activity in Turkmenistan. Even worse, the new legislation calls for criminal penalties for those found guilty of participating in "illegal religious activity."

"The adoption of this law marks a deterioration in the already appalling situation for religious freedom in Turkmenistan, reaffirming the Commission's recommendation that the country be named a 'country of particular concern' under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998," said USCIRF Chair Michael K. Young. "The enactment of new legal prohibitions on religious practice show that President Niyazov has no intention of easing his repressive policies - let alone of respecting Turkmenistan's international obligations to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief."

Even before the new Turkmen law on religion went into effect on 10 November, only the government-controlled Sunni Muslim and the Russian Orthodox communities have been able to officially register. As a result, the country's Baha'is, Shia Muslims, Jews, Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists, Armenian Apostolics, Lutherans, Hare Krishnas, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others cannot practice their religion without fear of official sanctions, which have included harassment, detention, imprisonment, beatings, deportation, and fines. On top of this they now face criminal prosecution. Even Sunni Muslims do not escape government repression, as a mosque was closed by the authorities when the imam refused to put a copy of the Ruhnama (President Niyazov's "spiritual writings") on the same stand as the Koran during televised Friday prayers.

The severe repression of religion in Turkmenistan - even before the enactment of the current religion law - has prompted the Commission to recommend that the Secretary of State

designate Turkmenistan a "country of particular concern" (CPC). According to Chairman Young, "the passage of an even more repressive law on religion in Turkmenistan is an unambiguous indication of the Turkmen government's continuing and flagrant disregard of its international human rights commitments and clearly puts Turkmenistan in the category of the world's worst religious freedom violators deserving CPC designation."

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Dean Michael K. Young ,
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